

MINISTRY TO THE CHRONOLOGICALLY GIFTED (The Withered Leaves of Autumn)

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Introduction

Before I begin to plunge into the theme of this article, I would like to bring to the reader a real saga of an old couple. Their story is really heart rending. I read this story in *The Examiner*, September 25, 2005. It really moved me. I am sure this would move the readers also. The story starts like this. "Few people in the parish knew they ever existed; they were onto edge of life, quietly supporting one another even in their immobile state. They were childless but had depended on a nephew who is now in a foreign country. He promised them a lot. His promises made them alive with hope amidst starvation, ailments and the ultimate degradation of immobility. The wife from her wheel chair would silently grieve for her husband, who was confined to bed for want of care, medicines and food that

she herself was wanting. Free supply of food to them from charitable organizations gradually dried up and the plea of the social workers to sell the place to secure their accommodation in a home fell on deaf ears. They would not deny their beloved nephew this one gift in return for all his promises that regularly came through his letters. It proved to be too late when they were finally moved to a home in quick succession, both departed for their heavenly abode leaving the flat and the empty promises behind. Promptly the nephew came down; loudly flaunted his grief and quietly claimed the flat as his own.”¹ This is only an example among many stories (real experiences) that you can narrate from your own life.

Probably all of us possess cherished memories of an aged person who has meant a great deal to us at a particular moment in our journey through life. Just reminisce the days of your past with your grand parents and their influence in your life. Yet it is true that many grand parents and parents who show their love and concern when they rear their grand children or children amidst untold difficulties, are simply neglected and abandoned in their old age. They are sent out of their own homes by their sons, daughters, sons-in-law or daughters-in-law. I am sure that everyone of us knows many cases like this. There are also positive cases which we should not forget. We must always praise those people who give due respect to the aged people in families and society.

This article would deal with the plight of the aged or aging people and would give some proposals to take up the ministry to the aging people. In everyday parlance, aged people are addressed

¹ Vera Alvares, “The Withered Leaves of Autumn”, *The Examiner*, September 25, 2004, p.8.

as 'senior citizens', 'aging people', 'aged people', 'old people', 'useless people' 'toothless people' 'sexless people' and so on. In this article, I prefer to address them as the "chronologically gifted." I have chosen this title to bring sunset to the myths and stereotypes embedded in the word "elderly."

Present Scenario

When one focuses one's attention on the care of the aged in India, one finds that the aged are the helpless ones, deprived of work and depending on charity, old age assistance or the benevolent help of others. The aged suffer from all types of physical ailments, and even become victims of robbery, assault and other crimes.² These problems are very cruel especially when the aged are poor. They are in need of help but the existing social institutions are not fully able to provide this help. The traditional joint families of India are known in fact for their respect towards the aged.³ The children are often entrusted to the grand parents while the parents are working and there is usually a close bond between grand parents and grand children.⁴ This gives a sense of worth to the aged, who in quite a few families, continue to inspire the household on important decisions. However, the rapid industrialization of country is slowly breaking this system

Nowadays the number of homes for the aged are increasing. It is true that the nursing homes or the homes for the aged provide basic care and medical facilities but they cannot

² Soodan Kirpal Singh, *Aging in India* (Calcutta: Minerva Associate Publication, 1975) vii.

³ S.C. Dube, *Indian Village* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967) 158-159.

⁴ Stephen A. Tyler, *An Anthropological Perspective* (California: Good Year Publishing Co., 1973) 134-135.

replace the homely atmosphere and the love from their own children and grand children. It is sarcastically said that a man builds a new house and calls it as "Annai Illam" (which means the house of mother) but he leaves his mother in a home for aged. There are incidents of lonely old people dying in their beds without the family members at bedside but having them in distant lands and missing them for months and years.

Cases like these are on the increase. What is irksome is that such cases seem to be more a rule than exceptions of social behaviour, since the plight of the seniors leading such lives, fails to touch a chord in our hearts.

Reasons

The reasons for this changed situation are the apathy and indifference. They lay at the door of changing times, nuclear families, widened horizons, monumental ambitions. Insistence on privacy and individualism are euphemisms of self centeredness. Members of the older generation are made to feel that they have served their purpose and now the progeny can do well without them.⁵

The generation gap is another reason. A survey conducted by a national online magazine points out that the modern generation scoffs at values such as contentment, financial thrift, conservative food and dress, staunch religiosity and sober habits, so dear to the older generation. Most of the values held by the old are crumbling under the onslaught of a new culture. Globalization fuelled by

⁵ Vera Alvares, "The Withered Leaves of Autumn", *The Examiner*, September 25, 2004, p.8.

rampant materialism has struck down all boundaries of guilt and inhibition. There are schemes available, even to smother the cry of conscience and gag the voice of truth.

How many old people have a peaceful death is a question (Cf. Tob 4: 3). Jimi Hendrix the singer once said: "It is funny how most people love the dead; once you are dead, your life is MADE."⁶

The book of Sirach says, "My child, help your father in old age and do not grieve him as long as he lives ... do not despise him" (Sir 3:12-13). All the wealth in the world is no substitute for the grace of living with one's own family. Are we so callous as to toss our elders out of our lives like used articles without any qualm? Even if the other people do like this, can we the Christians fail to see the image of God in our own parents and grand parents?

The Mystery of old Age

When and how does one become old? What is happening when a person is becoming old? Old age is not only a chronological fact. At times a man of 75 years may feel as young as 45 and the vice versa. Two people of the same age feel quite differently as to their senescence. Let us list out certain common characteristics of old age.

i) The Physical Tolls of Old Age

The physical aspect is the most important of the process of growing old. The human body, a marvel of God's creation, with its many and complicated organs working harmoniously together to achieve a common end, like any other motor machine, eventually

⁶ Vera Alvares, "The Withered Leaves of Autumn", 9.

will wear out. As years pass by, the wear-and-tear and quite often overuse of the various organs begin to take their toll. Even with the finest of care and the most thorough supervision, the human body will feel the burden of years. Each person has his or her tempo of aging.⁷

The parts of a human body, most exposed to elements and those which bear heavy workload signal deterioration first. The skin may become dry and lose its elasticity. The heart and blood vessels which are constantly working may wear out; stress may lead to high blood pressure and hardening of the arteries. The whole body will be affected ultimately when a part of it wears out or breaks down. Drowsiness, exhaustion, lassitude, lacklustre complexion affect old people but these things can be controlled by activity and positive emotions.⁸

As the body feels the aging, its activities slow down. The chronologically gifted person sleeps less; he/she reacts slowly and loses some of its vitality; he/she may think slowly and may not be able to accept new ideas. The most frequent physical problems of the old age are circulatory disturbances and weakening of the heart. The elderly develop problems of eye sight and hearing. The tooth problems affect his/her eating habits and cause often malnutrition. The aged are vulnerable to heart attack and stroke. Control of over weight, enough physical activity, avoiding smoking, high cholesterol and high blood pressure can serve as prevention against such deadly attacks. Cancer, arthritis, alzheimer also affect the old

⁷ For this section I heavily depend on the unpublished class notes of S. Singaroyan on Pastoral Theology, Good Shepherd Seminary, Coimbatore., 1999, p. 57.

⁸ *Ibidem*

people. Innumerable health problems may trigger a pessimistic attitude and may make a person on the defensive.⁹

Can one cope with physical aging? Yes. Crises of development encountered in the mid-years might be thought as “silent crises” because they are relatively undramatic and any ensuing damage may not become apparent until later. These crises can be significant for old age. For many of us the initial encounter with our own aging comes at the point of physique.

Youthful persons depend heavily on physically based powers for success. But successful aging involves the substitution of wisdom for physique as the dominant means of accomplishing life’s many tasks. The successful middle-ager discovers in the accumulation of life experience a valuable asset which can be judiciously used to help accomplish more than it would ever be possible by sheer exertion alone. To value our wisdom-based powers above our physique-based powers means to appreciate our head more than our muscle. We then evaluate tasks at hand in light of the available options and finite resources rather than simply plunging ahead in frenetic and often inefficient activity.¹⁰

ii) Psychological and Social Tolls of Old Age

Old people, compared to the younger groups, are susceptible to mental illness. In the very elderly person the brain functions are slowed down. There is a loss of memory. He/she may remember what he/she did when he/she was young, but cannot remember what he/she did just now. Anyway this does not diminish the quality.

⁹. S. Singaroyan, Unpublished Class Notes on Pastoral Theology, p. 57.

¹⁰. William M. Clements, *Care and Counseling of the Aging* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979) 30.

of mental activity. Intelligence does not necessarily suffer with age. They experience depression, loneliness and lack of initiative to live. The climb down from a high post of power and authority may be humiliating to some people. Attention seeking tactics at times are misinterpreted and leads to unpleasantness. Many drastic changes take place.

To deal with changes, each change in life circumstances can be experienced as an opportunity for growth or an occasion for loss. Indeed each change is likely to involve both. One of the most important developmental issues for middle age is to balance our inner accounting books in favour of growth. How we deal with mental and emotional challenges of change during the mid-years is thus of importance for old age, when the ability to handle change becomes crucial for successful functioning indeed for survival. If in middle age there is such an emotional rigidity that a person finds it extremely difficult to value new relationships and activities, then old age is likely to be experienced and are never replaced and new activities do not take the place of those given up because of new circumstances.¹¹

The fear of aging is a common denominator. How can we face the real fears and anxieties that accompany aging? They have to keep on giving themselves and receiving graciously. The world needs them. To feel needed and to meet the needs of other people, especially members of their immediate family, can be a main source of meaning and hope for them. Their age equips them to make unique contributions.

¹¹ William M. Clements, *Care and Counseling of the Aging*, 32.

The aged have a special problem, for they may be perfectly healthy; they are not like the sick, hoping to return to their former condition; they have reached a point of no return. Not only that, but the aged feel isolated, left out of community life and sharing. At the same time, the aged have a grace filled opportunity to grow in wisdom and in humility based on truth and self-acceptance. Their very isolation enables them to accept the two ultimate realities of life namely God and self. From this comes a self affirmation that gives peace and a deep trust in God's loving providence. Then death is seen as a transit from this world to the fulfillment of all that they have worked for and loved in this life.

An admirable example of old age is Anna a devout, prayerful old woman eighty four years of age who grew in faith and hope with the passage of the years. She had been a widow for many years and nourished herself on continuous prayer and meditation on the Scriptures. Because of her deep faith and persistent prayer, God became the companion of her widowhood. Though old in body, she was young in mind and spirit. She used her time not in gossiping but in prayer and meditation. She was not forlorn because of her widowhood; her faith in God's providence was too strong to permit that. She never separated herself from the temple community (Lk 2: 36-40).

How much less, lonely old people would feel if they spend much of their time in prayer and meditation; if they are involved as much as possible in their church's activities in whatever way possible?

iii) Old Age and Independence and Sense of Uselessness

There are many ways in which the aged try to assert their independence. This is an important factor in the care of the elderly to help them to retain their independence. If their physical condition warrants it, the aged can take up part time jobs and earn some money to be independent. This desire for the independence can be satisfied by asking their advice and requesting them to help a little in the house. They feel unwanted. The reality is that many educated or skilled older persons retain their ability to contribute to the welfare of the families or their communities.

Those who are called to minister to the chronologically gifted must possess extraordinary patience and understanding. It is not always easy. The young and the caring persons should keep the chronologically gifted persons active, so that they may not have too much free time to feel sorry for themselves and that they may feel that they are still wanted and appreciated. This can be achieved by involving them in hobbies and by making them live in familiar environment and by allowing them to carry out their formed habits which they used to do during their active years.

Ministry to the Elderly

The elderly are in many ways treated like the lepers of good old days. They are dumped into old-age homes, nursing homes, out of our sight and out of our minds. Nursing homes are not pleasant places to go into. The elderly need our compassion and love. What a meritorious thing it is, to visit the elderly and offer to do chores for them that they cannot do, or just to spend time with them, listening to them and chatting with them, to let them know that they are not ostracized or completely cut off from society. If we live long enough,

we, too, may very well be shunted off into nursing homes to be treated in much the same way as so many forlorn old people are treated.

Blessed Mother Teresa speaks of the following event to show the importance of loving the aged. Once when she visited a home for the aged, she found no smile on the faces of the elderly. She asked the sister in charge, "Sister, why are these people not smiling? Why are they looking towards the door?" The sister answered, 'It is the same every day. They are longing for someone to come and visit them.' Mother Teresa says of this situation, "The real poverty is that no one wants them."¹²

The pyramid of the world population has changed. The chronologically gifted people are no more the small number at the margin of the society. Because of their longer life and because of their great numbers, those in the third age constitute the nucleus of the society. According to the socio-political definition, old age begins with the age of retirement. But this criterion is not always acceptable, as many people, even after the age of retirement are in fact capable of greater contribution to the society. That is why there is a need for searching for a new criterion and new regulation.¹³

Longer life is both an achievement and a challenge of our time. In the Roman Empire (in first two centuries AD), the average life expectancy at birth was 23 years. With the development of culture, life style and medical sciences, the life expectancy increased

¹² Kathryn Spink, ed., *In the Silence of the Heart* (London: SPCK, Holy Trinity Church, 1983) 72.

¹³ S. Singaroyan, Unpublished Class Notes on Pastoral Theology, p. 55.

gradually. Studies on gerontology have established that there is an incredible increase of life span around this century. The following chart shows this increase of life expectancy.

1850	_____	40 years
1900	_____	47 years
1940	_____	63 years
1980	_____	over 65 years
2000	_____	over 68 years.

The percentage of the elderly varies from country to country. In the European countries it was 22% in 1987. In the United States of America nearly 20 million people have passed 65 years of age. More than 12,000 have lived 100 years and more. In western Europe, it was expected in the year 2000 about 40% of the population would belong to the category of the senior citizens. The longevity of the women over men is an additional problem. In Europe among those who are above sixty years, 67% are women and men 35%. The phenomenon in India is not very different. While life span has increased for some due to modern scientific advancements, modern life with its faster pace, and departure from nature's rhythm and nutritional living initiates the aging process at a much earlier age for some people.¹⁴

Some consider old age as burden for themselves and for others and care for the aged as a great inconvenience. In India still many elderly are taken care of in the families. Occasionally there are homes for the aged run both by the State and by private organizations, religious and secular. There are many in every part

¹⁴ S. Singaroyan, Unpublished Class Notes on Pastoral Theology, p. 56.

of the world who revere old age and render to the chronologically gifted respect and consideration that is due to them.¹⁵

The now elderly people were once strong and ambitious, the breadwinners and molders of the family and have done their share for the betterment of the society. Now they are weaker, less self-sufficient, and often homeless. But they are entitled to every respect, consideration and help. They should be made to realize that they are still appreciated and will not be pushed aside like a used toy. The younger ones must realize that after many years of life and experience, the chronologically gifted can still help if not actively, but at least with his/her prudent advice and knowledgeable encouragement.

In India the care of the elderly is normally assigned to the family. This is suited to the agrarian family set up, where even the elderly contributed their mite to the running of the agriculture or of the family. But now, with industrialization, socialization and education both the husband and wife are forced to work whole day and the elderly are left alone in the family without assistance. Where the elderly are unable and need constant care, the care of the elderly is a serious problem to the family. The government and private service agencies now begin to sense the problem, but no effective and global planning is found yet.¹⁶

The Church and the Care of the Aged

Pope John Paul II said, "An advanced age is not a curse, but a great gift and a privilege of some, which deserves to be used

¹⁵ *Ibidem*

¹⁶ S. Singaroyan, *Class Notes on Pastoral Theology*, p. 56.

wisely simply because not everyone has the good fortune to reach this stage, and above all, because this period provides real possibilities for better evaluating the past, for knowing and living more fully and becoming an example in the Church for the whole people of God.”¹⁷

The care of the elderly has been one of the main charitable activities of the Church, a unique form of witnessing to the love of the neighbour. In certain areas, the care of the elderly has become the criterion for the true disciple of Christ. It is by caring for the elderly without expecting any reward and serving these people who produce a little or nothing, that the Church of Christ establishes its identity in conformity with the gospels. Our Church plays a pivotal role in ministering to the old. We all know that all over the world each diocese runs a home for the aged. For example, Thanjavur (my diocese) diocese runs four homes for the aged. Likewise many dioceses in India as well as abroad are concentrating on this ministry along with many religious sisters.

In this context this is a serious problem for pastoral ministry. Every pastor called to be all things to all men should make it his/her special concern to care for the senior members of his/her parish. Certain parishes may have more to care for the senior citizens in the parish than the other classes of people. Hence every pastor should have a knowledge of the aged people and should learn the proper approach in dealing with them. The pastor should know that their physical, mental, financial, social and spiritual conditions and circumstances differ very much from those of the children, youth and adults.

¹⁷ Vera Alvares, “The Withered Leaves of Autumn”, 10.

Pastoral ministry to the aged should bring out the fact that in every phase of its existence, human life offers a possibility for continuity and discontinuity and a maturing of personality with a qualitative growth. Certain special problems of the aged must be kept in mind by the pastor - the loss of friends, breakage of social and family relationship, loss of social status, insufficiency of means of support for life and lack of respect.

Basic Needs and Characteristics of the Chronologically Gifted

Our ministry to the older adults will be a failure if we do not know about their nature and needs. We will make a greater contribution to the wellbeing of older adults by being aware of some of their basic needs and characteristics.

Older people need reassurance. Many of the persons we visit have lost their place in their families. They are afraid of illness, old age, death, change, being pushed around, being alone, and not having enough money. They tend to withdraw into themselves and to lose interest in anything not directly connected with their own routine.

Older people need appreciation. Older people need to maintain their self respect. We should never lie to them, instead we must treat them realistically. We must not overemphasize their infirmities but build hope in them. Older people need to maintain as much independence as possible. We can contribute to their independence by:

- * encouraging and helping them to do things for themselves - dressing, caring for hair and general appearance etc;
- * helping them to maintain their privacy;
- * encouraging cleanliness;
- * recognizing the need for and the importance of older people's possessions, no matter how valueless or unappealing;
- * not belittling their efforts either directly or indirectly by indicating they are too slow or not skillful enough;
- * encouraging them to assume some responsibility for doing small jobs no matter how insignificant the task seems to us.¹⁸

Equipping Oneself for the Ministry

First and foremost, there is need of solid study of the life span developmental perspective. Familiarity with the theories of Freud, Erikson and Maslow will stimulate the pastoral minister to process those theories into faith development. Paul Baltes reminds us that development is life long and that no age period dominates development. He also stresses that life-span development is embedded in history and is influenced by historical conditions. The elderly have been on a lifelong journey toward spiritual integration and in each decade of their lives they have interacted with previous ministers and ministries of the Church. Those encounters have been, for the most part, enabling. Some have been disabling. Ministers today will gain access to that experience by their attentive relatedness to the tenured believer. Gold will be discovered; so too dross.¹⁹

¹⁸ Maria Bruck, ed., *Parish Ministry Resources* (New York: Paulist Press) 142-143.

¹⁹ Robert J. Wjcks, ed., *Handbook of Spirituality for Ministers* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995) 507.

Second, the minister should cleanse himself or herself of over-simplified age related themes. Neugarten reminds us that it is no longer reasonable to describe the life cycle as a set of discrete stages. She emphasizes that most adulthood themes appear and reappear throughout the life cycle. Intimacy and freedom are as much issues for the elderly as they are for the adolescent. Wisdom is too felicitously credited to the chronologically gifted. It is an age-related stereotype to ignore the virtue of wisdom in the young and in middle years.²⁰

Third, the minister should be sensitive to the self-defeating behaviours, even pathologies, engendered by previous religious education during the early and middle years of the tenured believer. There are eight capital sins against self-esteem before, during and after the renewal of the Church. Those 'sins' regurgitate frequently when one ministers to the elderly.

- * Attitude toward one's body
- * Parental messages
- * Passivity cloaked as humility
- * Sense of not being saved
- * Neurotic psychological guilt (not moral guilt)
- * Fear of the Lord
- * Self alienation or the disowning of portions of oneself
- * Private imprimaturs we felicitously call 'sin'

These self-defeating behaviours have scarred the spiritual lives of even the mature elder. The prospective minister will heal these misappropriations of Jesus' message because the glory of God is man or woman fully alive.²¹

²⁰ R. J. Wicks, ed., *Handbook of Spirituality for Ministers*, 507.

²¹ R. J. Wicks, ed., *Handbook of Spirituality for Ministers*, 508.

Fourth, the minister to the aged needs to be a person with excellent peripheral vision. At any given time ninety five percent of the aged reside in the community, living either by themselves or with a spouse, adult relatives or friends. In many situations the spouse or relative or friend is a care giver. Care givers often find themselves in situations of stress, friction, fatigue and misunderstanding with the loved ones. The care givers are often unappreciated and at times abused. Care givers, prone to control the lives of loved ones, often cause turmoil to themselves. The minister with peripheral vision will sense that dissonance and make himself or herself available to the care giver. Oftentimes the care giver needs only respite from the daily grind.²²

Jesus always seemed to heal people who were on the edges of the crowd scene. Being available to both the elderly and the care givers is a needed skill for the alert minister. The elderly person will always be the beneficiary of any pastoral contact we have with their care givers. What Calvary it must be for the care giver attending to a loved one with a brain disorder of old age? Care givers faced with taxing demands on their time, freedom, energies and emotions, often become depressed. The minister can give them support and encouragement. Just as important, the visit of the minister affords the opportunity for the caregiver to vent feelings of guilt and resentment. The alert minister can be the catalyst for the care giver's peace of mind. In so many ways, ministry to the chronologically gifted is community based.

Finally, the minister should be a net worker aware of the comprehensive community-based information and services. Care

²² R. J. Wicks, ed., *Handbook of Spirituality for Ministers*, 508.

givers are often unaware of home services, community day centres, home visits and support groups. The daily newspaper is replete with information and invitation to the same. The minister should be the person informing family, relative or friend of such services for the frailelderly. Knowing the system is also a pastoral skill.²³

Attempt to convey empathy or understanding is not unique as a principle of the pastoral care of the aging but is a cardinal general principle of all pastoral care. (Empathy is a feeling into the life of the other and conveying that without experiencing the same complex of affect and cognition which the other does experience). The aging need empathic understanding as much as others.²⁴

“The pastoral care giver needs to be alert for signals that provide clues to the shape of concern about the future and how the person is responding to that concern. Although the aging cannot simply be exhorted to accept the limitations of future that their time of life imposes any more than they can be exhorted to accept most other troublesome aspects of their lives, the sensitive care giver can often assist persons in their struggle to a better vision of the future and the present. Not all are struggling, however as Kalish’s study indicates. Some have resigned to death rather than accept its meaning and have given up the struggle, and no pastoral purpose is served by trying to insist that they struggle. Pastoral care for them is supportive in character.”²⁵

²³ R. J. Wicks, ed., *Handbook of Spirituality for Ministers*, 508.

²⁴ James N. Lapsley, “Pastoral Care and Counseling of the Aging” in *Clinical Handbook of Pastoral Counseling*, Robert J. Wicks ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) 249.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 255.

Role of a Pastor

A pastor can help the elderly in many ways.

*** He can do some financial help; he can request the store keeper, the druggist and the doctor to give a special consideration to the aging people.**

*** Periodical visits would help the elderly to share their worries and to break their loneliness. More of this visit can be seen in the subsequent pages.**

*** He should satisfy their spiritual needs. In many parishes priests give communion on first Fridays. This should be appreciated and continued.**

*** Once in six months, all the elderly can be administered the sacrament of Anointing in the parish church, if it is possible.**

*** He can instruct his parishioners to be empathetic to the elderly in their houses through homilies, seminars and catechetical instructions.**

*** He should gently remind the family members about their duties toward the elderly when they do not fulfill their duties.**

*** He must prepare his parishioners (confined to bed due to prolonged illness and senility) for eternal life.**

*** He should console and strengthen their faith.²⁶**

*** He can create some opportunities for the youngsters to have some interaction with the chronologically gifted so that the young generation can benefit a lot from the rich experiences of the aging people. The Bible recommends this kind of interactions. This we see in the Book of Sirach. "Do not ignore the discourse of the aged, for they themselves learned from their parents...." (Sir 8:9).**

²⁶ S. Singaroyan , Unpublished Class Notes on Pastoral Theology, p.59.

A pastor alone cannot fulfill all these duties in his parish. He can ensure the co-operation of some parish members especially some youngsters in his work.

Role of the Parish Community

Christian communities should form groups of people willing and able to step in and shoulder the burden and give respite to the care giver. Besides giving financial aids, the parish can form visiting committees whose members would periodically visit the aging. We witness to the good hearted people like Legion of Mary, Vincent de Paul Society members, rendering their service to the elderly.

- * Some social activities can be arranged for them.
- * If their physical condition warrants, part time jobs can be arranged for them.
- * As in foreign countries they can be taken to hobby centres.
- * Their birth days can be celebrated in parishes.
- * If they are unable to come to the church for Mass due to their senility some parishioners can bring them to the church for Mass and other parish activities.
- * They can be helped in their shopping. We can take them for shopping if it is possible; otherwise we can get the list from them and deliver their grocery items in their houses.
- * If the parish can afford, small picnics or pilgrimages could be arranged.
- * Through seminars the parish priest must educate his parishioners about their responsibility to take care of the elderly.
- * We can use telephone. It is a touch with reality when the reality of life is limited to four walls. At the same time we should not abuse the telephone. It is easy to permit this handy necessity of

life to take the place of a visit. Use it to supplement and not to replace the periodic visit.

* Older adults enjoy walking together. So provide some opportunities.

* Be aware of what is possible or not possible within physical limits.

* World Elders' Day can be celebrated with special programmes in the parish on October 1. In all these both in planning and execution the chronologically gifted should be included.

* Rich parishes can provide rehabilitation centres. Government helps can be got in this regard.

For example, in Mumbai a project is executed for the chronologically gifted persons. That is called Project Day Care: It is a venture taken in Immaculate Conception Church, at Borivili, in Mumbai to reach out to the elders who often face loneliness, rejection, and despair.

“All through life, senior citizens worked hard to support their families, making many sacrifices and vital decisions. All of a sudden life has changed. Now their families want them to keep quiet, stay confined to one room, or even face the trauma of being discarded in a Home for the Aged. The families feel that by ensuring the senior citizens food, shelter and medicines their job is over. But the aged have self respect and dignity and feel they can still be of use.”²⁷

“Project Day Care provides an opportunity to the senior citizens to find new meaning in old age. It is not a club or another

²⁷ *The Examiner*, November 19, 2005, p. 19.

home for the aged. It is a place for senior citizens to come together and feel wanted and useful. The basic aim is to re-instil in them what they miss most: happiness with plenty of caring and sharing. For this they will be taken out of their homes where they are alone during the day and be allowed to interact with others of their age. They will have activities and entertainment to keep them occupied. Doctors and nurses will deal with any medical emergency so that no one needs to feel insecure. Project Day Care insists the value of family - these senior citizens remain with their families, spending only their lonely hours in a place of joy and energy."²⁸ We may wonder whether these things are possible. I am sure that these things can be done at least in a small level. What we need is the good will and service minded people.

Ten Commandments of Visiting the Aging²⁹

1. Listen to what is said as well as to the feelings that are expressed: fear, anger or hopelessness.

2. Take time before passing judgment on the aging or his or her way of life. After some acquaintance, you will begin to understand the more subtle aspects of his or her human situation.

3. Give the aging your genuine interest, warmth and reliability. This is more helpful than offering to solve his or her problems.

4. Do the friendly little things that occur to you as needed: run errands, make phone calls, drop a line to the person when you are out of town.

5. Inform yourself of the community and family resources so that the person concerned can turn for help.

²⁸ *Ibidem*

²⁹ Maria Bruck, ed., *Parish Ministry Resources*, p. 143. I have taken this material from this book. But I have modified a little according to the situation of aging.

6. Accept the aging person's complaints about the people in his or her life as well as about the aged home that keeps him or her waiting and the welfare worker who cheats him or her of his or her just dues. With his/her permission convey such complaints to the agency.

7. Relate in a natural, friendly way but avoid burdening them with your own problems. Mainly, conversation should center on the other person's concerns, triumphs and hopes, because he or she is a deprived person socially as well as economically.

8. Visit with regularity and reliability. The consistency of your visits may provide the aging with one of the few predictable pleasures of daily life.

9. Ask yourself, if you have a natural liking for the person you are visiting. The mutual liking is the oil that will lubricate the relationship and make the experience of maximum value.

10. Pray constantly for your new-found friend, sharing your faith in Christ so that he or she might enjoy the relationship of one within the fellowship of Christ.

Some More Tips to Visiting the Chronologically Gifted

Visiting these people is not as easy as one thinks. How to pay a visit to the chronologically gifted?

- * When we visit, we must call him/her by name.
- * We must reach out to him/her by holding his/her hands.
- * When the person is seriously ill or in coma stage, silence would be golden.
- * While we speak with the elderly we must speak slowly and distinctly.

- * We must listen to them especially when they express their discomfort, frustration and discouragement.
- * We must pray before and after the visits..
- * Let the person know our visiting plan ahead of time.
- * We must allow them to express their feelings.
- * When things are planned for them without their knowledge they feel that they are neglected. So we must be honest to them.
- * We must use the spiritual resources of the home and of the church.
- * We can read a short passage from the Bible and pray on the texts.
- * While we pray for them singing hymns can take place.
- * We can ask them to involve themselves in reciting intercessions.

At times certain visits may turn out to be hurting. Anyhow the pastor should be convinced that his presence can be reassuring the chronologically gifted person of God's concern and presence to him/her. This is the greatest reward. The greatest gift to the chronologically gifted is the gift of being with them; the gift of our presence.

Some Themes of Special Interest for the Chronologically Gifted³⁰

- God's glory in creation (Gen 1:1-13, Ps 8, 19: 1-6)
- The love we can share (1 Cor 13, 2 Cor 5: 16-20)
- God's love for us (Jn 3: 16-17, Mk 10 : 13-16)
- God's mercy and forgiveness for us. This consoles them (Lk 15)
- Comfort for our anxieties (Is 40: 28-31, Mt 6: 25-33)
- The beatitudes (Mt 5:1-12) etc.

³⁰ S. Singaroyan, Unpublished Class Notes, p. 61.

Chronologically Gifted and Liturgy

A case in point: body awareness pervades the dailyness of the elderly. Pastoral ministers should be aware of fatigue factors and sometimes interminable liturgical and paraliturgical ceremonies. Tailoring the Church's sacramental life to life stages has been, till now, an accomplishment of ministers and presiders. We have to accept that in many parishes worshipers are captive to the inaudibility of some proclaimers of God's word. The inability to hear is not age-related. In times of parish census the elderly should be asked to assess the quality of parish worship. This would be a real ear-opener. Parish priest can arrange for special Mass for these people.

Chronologically Gifted and Their Participation in a Parish Life

Pope John Paul II was very positive regarding the usefulness of the elderly both in their families and in the society. This we find in *Familiaris Consortio*. "There are cultures which manifest a unique veneration and great love for the elderly: far from being outcasts from the family or merely tolerated as a useless burden, they continue to be present and to take an active and responsible part in family life, though having to respect the autonomy of the new family; above all they carry out the important mission of being a witness to the past and a source of wisdom for the young and for the future". In fact "the life of the aging helps to clarify a scale of human value. The elderly often have the charism to bridge generation gaps before they are made: how many children have found understanding and love in the eyes and words and caresses of the aging..."³¹

³¹ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 27.

Then why can't we make use of their knowledge and experience in our parishes? The elderly should be encouraged to participate in the parish life or the life of the community where they reside. One's spirituality is nourished when one participates. The elderly should be urged to speak up and lend insight and give shape to the life of the community. Directly confronting the pastoral defects in parish life will aid the parish growth. They can act like precursors for a church wherein the four generation parish community will be common. The emerging pastoral needs of the older members of the community must be addressed by older persons themselves. It is the task of the ministers to establish forums wherein the felt needs of the tenured believer are addressed. The elderly are an exciting presence in many parishes and houses.

They can work as volunteers/helpers, out of gratitude to God and for benefits received in life and out of love for others. People of this age can gladly respond to become role models to the younger generation and their peers. They can serve others by giving time to those in need, helping charities, offering services to families, the neighbors and the local communities.

“There is an organization that has made these values a part of their lives and formed a world wide movement - “Life Ascending,” started in Paris 42 years ago. It has a total membership of 300,000 people in 60 countries in five continents. It is recognized by the Holy See.”³²

³² *The Examiner*, September 25, 2004, 10.

Conclusion

Present demographics assure the Church that the chronologically gifted will be an abiding and bidding presence in the future faith community. It is a real challenge to those presently engaged in serving that special population. We should be a hospitable presence when we are privileged to enter their space. Above all be a friend.

It is important that one must divert any excessive attention to the negative connotations of the old age such as the age of the elders, of the retired, of old people, of senior citizens, of people in the last span of their lives and so forth. Many retired men and women today are discovering that life has still a lot to offer them - a new and enriching vision of life at their age.

We cannot change reality, but one can change the vision and perception of reality bringing about a change in one's attitude and values when one reaches at this last span. It is especially in building up correct and inspiring attitudes. It helps a person to feel he/she is still useful and still has a lot to live for and a lot to enjoy.³³ The old age must be approached not as a fate or as evil but as a gift of God and it should be lived by them with the help of others. Homes for the aged can be opened but it should be only for the poor and downtrodden who do not and may not get any help and care from their own family members. If we are able to do away with the homes for the aged that would be still better. It is not a utopian idea. If we are able to show a little more love, a little more concern, a little more patience to our beloved parents and grand parents we can realize this dream.

³³. *Ibidem*

Thus our ministry to the chronologically gifted must be seen as relational, reciprocal, participative and accountable. The ministers, both tenured and expectant must see themselves not only as agents of spiritual growth but as receivers. If we do so any minister will be spiritually transformed by those people to whom he or she serves.

We cannot dialogue reality, but we can dialogue with it. We can dialogue with reality by asking about a thing's nature and values when we observe it in the first place. We can dialogue up context and meaning outside of a thing's nature. We will not find a lot to live for in a thing if we do not see it in a context that is not a part of it. We can dialogue with reality by looking at it from the inside and seeing it as a part of a larger whole. We can dialogue with reality by looking at it from the outside and seeing it as a part of a larger whole. We can dialogue with reality by looking at it from the inside and seeing it as a part of a larger whole. We can dialogue with reality by looking at it from the outside and seeing it as a part of a larger whole.